

**T**raveling Route 66 at twilight, a magical transformation occurs as the neon signs begin to glow...



...it is almost as if each sign were capturing a tiny portion of the vivid colors of the New Mexico sunset to preserve the glorious hues overnight and release them at daybreak. These historic signs, beckoning resident and visitor alike with flashing arrows and promises of comfort and convenience, are one of the most recognized and celebrated hallmarks of the great highway John Steinbeck called the "Mother Road."

Today the glowing gasses that define the signs we call neon are increasingly at risk. Interstate travel, economic hardship, and physical age are taking their toll on these icons of Route 66. But this loss is not just due to failed businesses and deferred repairs. It is also the result of modern sign ordinances and policies, which often ignore and sometimes exclude these historic beacons from the heyday of Route 66.

This brochure has been designed to help you and your community learn more about these colorful signs and to introduce some practical tools and recommendations you may find useful in ensuring that your share of New Mexico's night sky remains forever enchanting.

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For more information on saving signs in your community, contact your city government or The Alliance.

**New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance** (The Alliance) is a statewide non-profit membership organization that promotes, protects, and advocates for New Mexico's Heritage. Chartered in 1996, the organization holds annual statewide conferences and regional workshops across the state and has successfully promoted and protected resources through an Endangered List. The Endangered List is an ongoing project, with applications taken in the fall of each year.

Applications are available on line at <http://www.nmheritage.org> or by contacting The Alliance office at (505) 989-7745. To qualify for the list, entries must be 50 years or older, within New Mexican state boundaries, historically, culturally, or architecturally significant, and in danger of being lost, destroyed, or substantially altered. For further information, or to become a member of The Alliance, contact us at:



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## *Saving* **New Mexico's ROUTE 66 Historic Signs**





## Various Mounting Styles

Exterior neon signs are classified as to their type of mounting. Along Route 66, the remaining historic signs reflect the pole, vertical, rooftop and fascia techniques of mounting signs. The majority of these signs are pole signs with bracket mounts to steel posts.



The sign for Motel Capitan (above left) and the restaurant sign (above right) are examples of pole mounted signs.



Budville Trading Company, fronting Route 66, started from a modest mercantile in the mid-1930s, prospered to become a landmark known up and down Route 66. The Budville sign is an example of a pole mounted sign.



These Tucumcari rooftop signs are the only free standing channel style rooftop signs remaining along Route 66 in New Mexico.

Photo: David Kammer

## Preservation... Working with Change

In many communities across the United States, historic signs that would no longer be constructed or even allowed under most modern sign ordinances, have been embraced, protected and restored because they have become recognized as icons. Imagine Los Angeles without its famous "Hollywood" sign — nothing more than a crass real estate advertisement when first erected. Across Baltimore's revitalized Inner Harbor the giant "Domino Sugars" sign still warms and brightens each dusk — a reminder of an industrial harbor of another era. And what would happen to baseball at Boston's Fenway Park without the landmark "Citgo" sign and its

regular and reliable rhythmic repetitions? These signs are historic features that long ago transcended their basic function to promote a consumer product. And these signs, which violate most modern every ordinance in Los Angeles, Baltimore and Boston, have been specially preserved and protected because...well...the cities just wouldn't be the same without them.

Smaller communities too are beginning to realize that historic signs are part of their heritage. Theater marquees are being restored even though films are no longer shown in buildings converted to other uses. Signs once beckoning travelers to grand hotels and roadside motels have been relit and adopted as the names of the senior citizen housing or apartments to which the hotel or motel has been converted. And some communities have simply "grandfathered" or allowed the historic signs of businesses to continue to operate under special historic sign ordinance provisions.

In other instances, a minor modification to a historic sign may allow a business the opportunity to continue the legacy. An abandoned Montgomery Ward neon roof sign, too large to be allowed by modern sign ordinances, was creatively adapted by a Maryland developer who replaced the "W" and "D" from "Ward" with a "P" and "K" — thus creating the Montgomery "Park" office building from the old department store's warehouse. The restored and modified historic sign allowed the developer much greater visibility than any new sign could ever provide. Similarly, along the historic National Road in Indiana (the nation's first federally funded highway, begun in 1804 and now known as US Route 40), the neon "US 40 Motel" sign was converted to identify a new business use by replacing the "E" and "L" in "Motel" with an "O" and "R". With the addition of an historically designed "Parts" the old sign has new life as "US 40 Motor Parts".



"Los Alamitos" employs a flat surface style; "Motel" employs channel letters. This is a pole-mounted sign, in Grants.



## What do sign ordinances do?

Sign ordinances and policies help communities define who they are, prevent unsightly, garish and distracting signs, and enhance the roadside environment. While these are lofty goals and objectives, they are occasionally applied without any recognition or accommodation for signs that may have historic or cultural significance. As a result, some communities are actually losing interesting and colorful neon and other historic signs because they no longer conform to local policies governing signs.

For communities along Route 66 it is particularly important to determine if any existing policies or codes are detrimental to historic signs. Could a well-intended provision for height or size restrictions in your ordinance actually make unlawful a historic sign that has long enhanced your evening drive? There are instances where older and historic signs are "grandfathered" or "allowed" to remain as long as the business continues. But if the business closes or relocates, what happens to the historic sign? Are there accommodations to allow historic signs to be adopted for new uses?

In communities without any sign ordinances or guidance, you may want to consider the value historic signs add to your community—both as a cultural legacy and tourism resource for the increasing number of travelers experiencing and looking for the romance of old Route 66. Are any of these historic signs at risk? If not, what assurances do you have that some unexpected action might cause their loss in the future?

As with all ordinances and policies, it is important they reflect the broad goals, needs and aspirations of your community. The idea of neon and other historic signs as special resources may not be embraced by all communities; however, if these are resources that your community values and enjoys, you must ensure that your community provides the flexibility and commitment to encourage their preservation.



### Franciscan Lodge Signs

(c. 1953), 1101 E. Santa Fe Boulevard, Grants, NM. The Franciscan Lodge offers a relatively rare example of double neon signage incorporating two distinct types of signs. A sign mounted on three metal posts is located in the northeast courtyard of the double U-plan motel and is approximately 30 feet high and 38 feet wide. Using the flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge" topped by the smaller lettered "Your home on the road." A second rooftop-mounted sign is approximately nine feet high and nine feet wide and is located above the hipped roof of the office and secured with guy wires. Also using the flat letter style, the sign contains neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge", "No Vacancy", and "Office", with "TV" on a panel that was added to the original sign. An arrow with two arcs and illuminated by sequentially animated light bulbs points downward toward the office door.

### Blue Spruce Lodge Sign

(c. 1950), 1115 E. 86 Boulevard, Gallup, NM. This pole-mounted sign employs a single metal pole painted to effect the trunk of a spruce tree. Located at the sidewalk in the middle of a courtyard with a U-plan, the sign is approximately 28 feet high and nine feet wide and has the form of a spruce tree. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "Blue Spruce Lodge", "Steam Heat", and "No Vacancy." A popular landmark along Route 66, the sign is included as an inset in the early postcards published for the motel.



### Sun n Sand Motel Sign

(c. 1960) E. Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa, NM. Approximately 40 feet high and 21 feet wide, the sign is mounted on two metal poles. Using the channel letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "Sun n Sand" and "Motel" with the former set within a large Zia sun at the top of the sign. The sign is located approximately 10 feet from the roadway in a broad valley at the northeast corner of the motel property. An early example of the use of higher sign poles that would become common in the 1970s, the height of the sign may represent the original owner's efforts to compensate for the incline on which the property is located, giving the sign greater visibility to motorists descending into the valley along Route 66 from both east and west.

## Neon Technology & Construction

Common to all of these signs was the technology of construction and installation. Neon tubes were generally affixed to metal. Most often they were attached to a sheet metal box on which illuminated details such as letters or figures were painted onto the metal with the box providing a housing for the wiring and electrodes as well as the two slides necessary for a double-faced sign. The glass tubing was then attached to the electrodes at holes punched through the sheet metal. Less frequently, a silicone glass was fired onto the metal, creating a porcelain, or vitreous enamel coating over which the tubing was placed. In many instances the letters and figures painted on the sheet metal were flat; in other instances the edges of the letters or figures were raised, creating channels in which the neon tubing was placed. While the latter channel letter technique offered the advantage of concentrating the tube's light, thus producing greater visibility, its flat horizontal surfaces tended to retain moisture, making the metal more susceptible to rusting, which, no doubt, accounts for the relatively low number of historic channel letter signs.

*See Hagler's Cultural Properties, April 5, 2002; Historic Preservation Division, File 1-011, "Neon Signs Along Route 66" by David Kanner*



## What can I do to help preserve my community?

As with any type of historic or special community feature, it is necessary to "define" the characteristics and features that distinguish a historic sign from the others. There are many ways to do this. You may establish a time period determining historic significance—for example, "Signs from 1920 to 1950s are most representative of travel along the original Route 66 in our community." You may choose to recognize all signs prior to a certain date or you may choose to focus on a particular type (neon or rustic, for example).

Once you have defined what constitutes a historic sign in your community, you will want to conduct an inventory of the signs which meet the definition. How many do you have? Are some considered community icons or landmarks while others are hardly noticed? Are any signs examples of particular technological advancements or construction? What condition are the signs in? Are any of your historic signs on abandoned properties?

Flexible sign ordinances can be an ideal opportunity to preserve the historic signs in your community. While ordinances are designed to protect commonly held values and ensure quality of life you must still be aware of the impacts they will have on property owners. For example, how would you respond to the following two scenarios?

**Scenario 1** A profitable business owner insists that his or her historic sign is a detriment to their business and should be replaced by a modern sign.

**Scenario 2** A business owner barely surviving says he cannot afford to replace the broken neon tubes that have historically identified the family business—a new sign would be easier and cheaper.

In scenario 1, you must question if the ordinance is properly and evenly applied to all businesses in your community. If it is, the business owner should be required to comply with the policy (a provision may even allow the erection of an additional modern sign on site).

In scenario 2, you must consider the impact the ordinance will have on a struggling business owner. Can you provide any assistance (technical or financial) to the owner? You may want to have facts and figures available that demonstrate that restoration (often assumed more expensive) is more affordable than the owner may realize.